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ABSTRACT

This paper explores and discusses the concept of reading comprehension from two major perspectives. One perspective is based on the theory that reading comprehension constitutes a pattern of skills. The other perspective is based on a psycholinguistic view of reading: reading as a language process. Strategies for gaining comprehension during reading are discussed as being similar to those already used by the learner in listening: sampling, predicting, testing, and correcting. Three major cueing systems for achieving comprehension are discussed: graphophonic, which is basically concerned with using cues within words; syntactic, which includes the use of inflectional endings, grammatical relationships, and punctuation markers; and semantic, which involves the information the reader has to bring to the printed page. An example of a child using the semantic and syntactic systems effectively is also presented. (WR)

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT OF COMPREHENSION

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Over the years reading comprehension has been explored and explained from various perspectives. In fact, over sixty years ago Huey raised questions concerning comprehension which are not yet answered. Furthermore, the process of reading comprehension has not been defined or conceptualized with any degree of general consensus, despite the fact that almost without exception reading authorities and practitioners alike feel comprehension is the most important outcome of the reading process.

This paper will explore and attempt to explain the concept of comprehension. This attempt will look at comprehension from a psycholinguistic perspective: that comprehension is directly related to the surface and deep structures of our language and that reading is a form of communication and as such is a language process. All of the language processes are related but listening and reading, the receptive processes, are closely aligned because they both rely on the surface structure of language as input and they both have the deep structure of language as output.

The surface structure for reading is the graphic or printed display whereas the surface structure of listening is the phonological or sound display. The surface structure then is the form of language that reaches the eye or the ear. The deep structure of language is the meaning or semantic interpretation which the learner assigns to the surface structure, utilizing his total past experiences and his knowledge of language. Comprehension, therefore, is a process through which the learner progresses from the surface structure of language to the deep

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structure of language. Strategies for gaining comprehension from reading are basically the same as those already used by the learner in listening; sampling, predicting, testing, and correcting.

From this perspective, comprehension is reached through the use of three major cueing systems: 1) graphophonic; 2) syntactic; and 3) semantic. The graphophonic cueing system is basically concerned with using cues within words. These cues could include letter-sound relationships, phonics (both synthetic and analytic methods), shape or configuration, word patterns or phonograms, and words recognized at sight.

The reader utilizing the syntactic cueing system would transfer his knowledge of oral language to printed materials. He would recognize that the occurrence of certain words or structures can enable him to make predictions about future structures. Using syntactic cues would include the use of inflectional endings, grammatical relationships and punctuation markers. The reader's use of the syntactic cueing system would of course reflect his dialect.

The semantic cueing system, the third system employed in the reader's quest for comprehension, basically describes what has traditionally been referred to as context. Through the use of this cueing system the child can anticipate known words. This system can also build meanings for words not in the child's meaning vocabulary. This system involves the information that the reader brings to the printed page. This input is more than an adequate knowledge of vocabulary. It includes background experiences and knowledge of concepts. If the reader does not have semantic input to bring to the printed material, then he will not be able to comprehend. Meaning does not exist in the print on the page, only in

the minds of the writer and the reader.

The graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic cueing systems are used simultaneously. The reader samples the graphic display or print utilizing these cueing systems to enable him to make predictions about the deep structure.

The reader must learn strategies to select the most productive cues. If the reader has an abundance of semantic cues available to him, he will not have to utilize as many syntactic and graphophonic cues. (To use all of the cues available would be inefficient.)

In the comprehension process, the mature reader has the necessary abilities to use the graphophonic cueing system to discriminate between graphic symbols and words and phrases. However, it is likely that he uses minimal graphophonic cues to acquire meaning from much larger units of language based on his past experiences.

The proficient reader will use minimal graphophonic cues to aid him in predicting the syntactic structure of written language which is based on his knowledge of oral language structure. In addition to the minimal use of the graphophonic cueing system and his use of the syntactic cueing system, the proficient reader also uses semantic cues to aid in his predictions and expectations of what is to come on the printed page. The more control the learner has of his oral language and the greater his background of experiences, the less visual information he needs to gain meaning from the text.

On the other hand, the beginning reader utilizes many graphophonic cues which decrease in use as he reaches proficiency. In fact, the use of a great many graphophonic cues slow learners in their progress toward reading proficiency.

They tend to overlearn the graphophonic cueing system which causes them to read so slowly that the working memory is overloaded to the point that it is difficult for them to gain information or meaning. Therefore, the beginning reader often finds reading a laborious process.

To become a proficient reader it is necessary, then, to increase the use of non-visual information (syntactic and semantic cue systems) and decrease the use of visual information (graphophonic cue system). On the other hand, the beginning reader often reads words and elements of words rather than thoughts. As a result (or perhaps as a cause) he uses too much visual information.

This can be demonstrated as we consider the amount of visual information needed to identify a word in isolation as compared to identifying the same word in a sentence. Through the expectancy and predictive aids made available to the reader by the use of syntactic and semantic cueing systems, the reader requires much less visual information to identify the word in a meaningful setting. Thus, the proficient reader uses much less visual information. He uses only enough visual information to confirm or disconfirm a prediction.

In addition to the semantic and syntactic cueing systems, readers use less visual information because of the redundancy of our language. Redundancy is the providing of numerous cues to the same information. The reader is aided in his understanding, for if he fails to gain meaning when the concept is presented in one form, he will be able to see it again and perhaps understand the concept when it is presented in an alternate form. The proficient reader is the one who makes the most out of the redundancy of written language and relies more on the syntactic and semantic than on the graphophonic processes in reading.

A child who uses the semantic and syntactic cueing systems efficiently might make miscues that fit into the total context of the material being read. On the other hand, exact use of all cues which cause slow and non-fluent reading, would also be inefficient, and cause the reader to lose his final goal: comprehension. For instance, in a diagnostic situation a nine-year-old "disabled reader" read a passage about birds. She made effective use of the semantic and syntactic cueing systems and put minimal reliance on the graphophonic cueing system. She read, "Jim said, 'They want help'" when the material stated, "Jim said, 'Let's help them.'" She read, "Mother gave them some bread." when the material stated, "They asked Mother for bread."

Another child reading the same passage and relying heavily on graphophonic cues to the exclusion of the syntactic and semantic cues was unable to gain meaning from the material. He read, "Jim said, 'Let's hulp then.'" when the material stated, "Let's help them." He read, "Mother gave bead to then" when the material stated, "Mother gave bread to them."

The little girl who was reading for meaning and used her syntactic and semantic knowledge knew so much about her language that she did not need many graphophonic cues but was able to go directly to the meaning while substituting some words and omitting others. She was able to score high on a comprehension check. In conclusion, she responded to the material in the way that a proficient reader might respond. On the other hand, the little boy who leaned on the graphophonic cueing system to the exclusion of the semantic and syntactic cueing systems was unable to comprehend the material. He substituted words that did not make sense, but a phonetic spelling of his miscues would indicate they look very similar to the words in the text: bead for bread, hulp for help, and then for them. Readers

should be led to understand that reading is not an exact process and that one word or one phrase can be substituted for others without loss of comprehension. The fluent reader (the little girl) did not go from words to meaning but rather went from meaning to words.

Comprehension is not a process of synthesizing individual graphic symbols into words, and words into sentences. In fact, the reader who attempts to read for exact accuracy will usually be unable to comprehend. This view of comprehension states that the importance of a sentence is not that it is composed of a number of individual words, rather it is how these words relate to adjacent words and what their grammatical function is in the sentence.

A psycholinguistic view of comprehension states that the most productive method to discover the meaning of a sentence is to read more of the paragraph; the most productive method of improving the learner's ability to read and comprehend is to read more. Not to read words but to read for meaning. Not to require exact replication because when reading for meaning the opportunity to check for mistaken concepts and even incorrect words is there.

This analysis of the concept of comprehension has attempted to define reading comprehension from a psycholinguistic perspective: that reading is a language process and that as children strive to comprehend they develop strategies for handling the surface structure. These strategies lead them to sampling, predicting, testing, and correcting in order to acquire the deep structure of the written language. This process involves the use of three cueing systems; graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic. In this theory of comprehension, reading has been defined as an information gathering process. The reader must be

totally involved in striving to reconstruct the author's message. He utilizes all of his past experiences and learnings as well as his knowledge of the structure of language.

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